

Meeting With Begin: Arms For Israel, Egypt And Saudi Arabia;  
And Weizman Trip - 1978 Source - Wikileaks

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1. Summary: Roy Atherton and I met with Begin, Dayan and Weizman this morning (January 26) for more than an hour. Bulk of conversation was devoted to airing of serious Israeli concerns regarding (a) constancy of U.S. **commitment** to GOI (govt of Israel) on sales of F-16's, (b) sale of F-15's to Saudi Arabia, (c) sale of F-5e's to Egypt, and (d) relationship of these issues to timing for Weizman trip to U.S. although Begin remained calm and controlled throughout conversation, it is apparent that he is very worried that we may be about to use pressure tactics on Israel in regard to decisions on F-16's, both as to timing and numbers of planes. This morning's news that Senator Church is recommending a freeze on arms sales to the Middle East while peace negotiations are in process clearly has added to his concerns - and to his suspicion that something is afoot. He reacted somewhat less strongly to the possibility of sale of F-5e's to Egypt (possibly because he does not see this as an imminent decision) than to the F-15 sale to Saudi Arabia on which he came down very hard. He and Weizman graphically described how this would put every population center in Israel within range of the Saudi air force. This new reality, combined with the possibility of Egyptian pilots at the controls in any future conflict, is clearly an unsettling specter for him and Weizman. He pushed very hard on the fact he has the president's **commitment** that there will be no delay in providing F-16's to Israel: he is anxious that this

be finally nailed down during Weizman's visit to Washington, which he has now forcefully asked be rescheduled for the week starting February 5. end summary.

2. Roy Atherton and I met for over an hour this morning with Begin, Dayan and Weizman. As we had earlier forecast, primary purpose of meeting was to register Israel's strong concern over possible slow-down in decision on new arms supply to Israel and aircraft sales to Israel and aircraft sales to Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

3. Begin opened the conversation by referring to Roy's Saturday evening briefing of your talks with Sadat and the fact that Roy had not mentioned anything about Sadat's request for U.S. arms. The following morning when he had read verbatim text of Sadat's speech, he and his associates had been very surprised that this key subject had not been touched upon the previous evening. He noted I had been kind enough to phone him to confirm that a quick check with the record available to us indicated that no such formal request had been made. Now, however, he had learned from Dinitz in Washington and from press reports of your meetings on the Hill this week that indeed the subject of supply of modern weapons to Egypt, as well as to Saudi Arabia, "now seems on the agenda." This, he said initially, could cause impasse in negotiations- although he did not repeat not return to this theme again in the course of long conversation that followed.

4. Begin said he wanted you to understand that this is a most important issue for Israel. Put in its simplest terms, it gives force to Sadat's threats that if Israel does not meet his

demands, the threat of war becomes more real. He regretted that neither the president nor you had provided him with any information on this new development. Roy responded that before we went any further he wanted to reconfirm what I had told Begin on Sunday morning. Sadat had not raised the subject with you in the way he described it in his speech. The issue was raised by Sadat, almost in passing, during his tete-a-tete with you when he asked if we could send a team to look over his military requirements in the context of the problems in the horn of Africa. Roy repeated that he had not brought this up in his briefing because it played such a minor part in your conversation with Sadat. I followed up with points in para 10 of ref (a) summarizing Sadat's concerns.

5. I then said you had asked that I make one thing clear to Begin this morning, namely, that there were no present plans under consideration to supply Egypt with major arms items other than possibly some F-5e's which, as he knew, we had been thinking about for some time. Begin interrupted to say that this is the first he had heard of any supply of F-5e's to Egypt. he asked Dayan and Weizman if they were aware of such a possibility. Dayan said no and Weizman answered that it was the first time he had "officially heard" we were considering such a sale. I reminded Begin that the president, in fact, had mentioned this possibility to Begin last time he was in Washington. After some head scratching Begin finally recalled the president having referred to it, but said he had not described it as a formal Egyptian request or a concrete U.S. plan.

6. Begin then asked Weizman for a technical comparison of the F-5e with the F-15 and F-16. Weizman replied the best comparison he could give was he wouldn't like to see the Egyptians get any aircraft, but if this were inevitable he would rather they have F-5e's than F-15's or 16's. He then gave a brief technical description of the F-5e's' capability, stressing that because of its relatively short strike range so long as the Israelis stayed in the Sinai the F-5e would pose no particular problems to the IDF.

7. Begin then let the other shoe drop. He said he had heard on the morning news that Senator Church had proposed that all U.S. arms supplies to the Middle East should be suspended while the peace talks were in progress. As he understood it, the Church's suggestion was really aimed at the proposal to sell F-15's to Saudi Arabia. But the effect of his proposal would mean that "we would be punished by what we do not deserve." He hoped he need not explain the implications of such a decision held for Israel. First, it would add Saudi Arabia to the list of confrontation states. Secondly, it would mean that Eilat would become only 10 minutes flying time from the new Saudi base at Tobuk. The F-15 range would put any target in Israel within easy range. Thirdly, since the Saudis do not have a sufficient number of trained pilots, it was inevitable that should another conflict take place Egyptian pilots would fly these aircraft.

8. Weizman weighed in by observing that if the argument that F-15's for Saudi Arabia are to be used for defensive purposes, then a new and better argument to the south and east. Since

there were no Saudi targets in western Saudi Arabia, why are the Saudis planning to put F-15's at Tobruk unless they are there for offensive use. (Atherton says he was not sure Weizman's assumption was correct; the F-15's might well be based elsewhere in Saudi Arabia.)

9. Begin reiterated that he could not understand the logic of supplying such an advanced aircraft to the Saudis. he repeated that Israel is not threatening anyone, but rather is being constantly threatened by its neighbors. He thought such a sale would only strengthen those who hoped for the demise of Israel. He specifically noted that it would strengthen the hands of those in Egypt who did not wish Sadat to succeed in his peace initiative. But whatever happened in regard to the Saudis, what concerned him most of all was his concern that there might be some wavering in Washington in regard to its **commitment** to Israel on F-16's. I assured him that the question of our **commitment** on this did not arise. I said you had assured the SFRC yesterday of this fact. The only outstanding questions were regarding the timing of delivery and the numbers. We were actively studying these questions, along with the other requests contained in matmon c.

10. Begin urged that a decision be made on these two questions during Weizman's forthcoming visit. He reminded us that when he had discussed this issue with the President he had been promised that there would be no delay in the decision. "The question is vital to us," he said. I responded that there was nothing about any delay in our decision on timing and numbers which would affect when the Israelis would

receive the first F-16's. Israel's place in the production line remains reserved for delivery of aircraft starting in 1981. In order to preserve Israel's place in line a formal letter of **commitment** would not have to be made until early this summer. Weizman raised the question that in the absence of any contracts training preparations could not be started. He recalled that the Israelis had started preparing for the F-15 two years before the first aircraft arrived. I reminded him that this was 1978 and since the first planes were not due until 1981, there was clearly plenty of time to put these arrangements in train.

11. I then turned back to the issue of F-15's to Saudi Arabia, following line of argument in para 8 of ref (a). I said I hoped Begin understood how much importance we attach to Saudi Arabia remaining a moderate force in the middle east. We assumed that he shared our judgment that Saudi support for Sadat's peace initiative was a critical factor to its success. This also implied continued Saudi financial support to Sadat. For more than two years the Saudis have been talking of the need to replace their old lightnings. We have made a **commitment** to them in principle that we would supply them with a modern aircraft. The F-15 is the plane they want. I said that whether we or the Israelis necessarily think the F-15 is the right plane for them, I trusted that he would agree that in the end it was the Saudi's decision. The problem we are struggling with at the moment is the confluence of decisions we must make regarding meeting **commitments** to Israelis, the issue of F-15's to Saudi Arabia, and whether we will make available F-5e's to Egypt. I said frankly and personally, there was merit in the

argument that announcement of supply of additional modern aircraft to the area at this moment did not contribute to the success of the peace process. We are faced with a very complex dilemma.

12. Roy said that he had been through many discussions between the Saudis and the President and you on this subject. The Saudis feel that they have a **commitment** from us to replace their lightnings with F-15's. This was a decision made by the Ford administration and we faced a problem of credibility if we did not meet it. He added that he wanted Begin to understand that should we make such a sale, we would make it very clear to the Saudis that they would be in violation of the sales agreement should they make the aircraft available to any other country or train other country nationals on it without our permission. We would leave the Saudis in no doubt that such a move would have very serious consequences for our relations.

13. At this point Dayan entered the conversation for the first time. He noted that the rejectionist states are being heavily supplied by the soviets with new equipment. If Senator Church's proposal were to be agreed to, who would control Soviet supplies to Syria and Iraq? Certainly not Senator Church. He had also heard on the radio this morning that King Hassan of Morocco had said Sadat's peace initiative is now past history and that the Arabs must again re-unite and use any means including military attack to regain their lands. If the Church concept were to be accepted, the only one who would suffer would be the Israelis. No one is going to attack

Egypt or Saudi Arabia. Israel is the only target. The Church proposal would be most dangerous for Israel.

14. I said that as I understood the situation the sfrc currently has a study underlay regarding arms balance in the Persian Gulf. One group of senators has asked the administration to delay notification to Congress of the sale of F-15's to Saudi Arabia pending completion of this study. Another group has proposed that no aircraft be sold while peace negotiations continue. The President's dilemma is how to meet the **commitments** of his predecessor in regard to Saudi Arabia and his own **commitments** to Israel, and even more vital, how to help get the Egyptian-Israeli negotiations moving forward again.

15. Begin then asked "what could be done immediately to implement the administration's **commitment** so that we will start getting these planes." Weizman had postponed his visit to Washington only because the Israelis want the peace process to continue. This is the only reason he did not leave for Washington today. The question now was what could we do to ensure that a contract was signed during his visit. Turning to Ezer, he asked if he could be prepared to leave next Thursday (February 2). Ezer replied affirmatively. I said I wanted to remind Begin again that we had not yet made the decision on the number of 16-s we would make available. Also, the timing of the announcement had not yet been decided. Therefore, there was no guarantee if Ezer were to leave next Thursday we could meet the Prime Minister's desires. Roy reaffirmed that a further delay in Weizman's trip would in no way delay the



decision-making process. Weizman asked what would have happened if he had gone through with his plans and left today. Would the decision have been made this week? I reminded him that on several occasions he had told me that while he would like to have "something to bring back," that was not the primary purpose of his trip.

16. Pressing the issue, Weizman asked if it would be possible to see Secretary Brown during the first week of February. I said I understood the Chanover had talked endlessly in recent days with DOD officials about rescheduling the visit. I understood that from the point of view of Secretary Brown's schedule, the month of march was the first good time. but if Weizman wished to go tomorrow we would do everything we could to arrange it. Weizman then said he would like to make an official request that the visit be rescheduled for the week of February 6 (he assumes he will be back in Cairo new week for the military committee, would return here to report, and then leave for the U.S. to be available for discussions in Washington February 6- 9.) He said that he would of course want to meet with Secretary Brown and would wish to spend about 48 hours in Washington (in effect repeating more or less the Washington program originally scheduled for next week on week later). He said he would worry about his program elsewhere in the U.S. Begin added that Weizman should also see you in order to report on progress at the Cairo military talks. (I know he also hopes very much that the president and Brzezinski might also wish to see him.) we ended this portion of the conversation with Begin asking me rather formally to ask that Weizman be received in Washington the week

beginning February 6, hoping that Ezer would return with the "commitment of commitments".

17. Comment from Atherton: We obviously cannot turn down Begin's formal request for Weizman visit week of February 6 without major flap, and I would not repeat not recommend doing so. This timing, however, and the publicity that will surround the visit will not be helpful to the negotiating process. A positive response on F-16's during Weizman visit will have negative impact on mood in Arab world, and most importantly in Egypt and Saudi Arabia; failure to give a response during the visit will have negative impact in Israel and will be viewed as U.S. pressure for concession in negotiations. To minimize our problems, I believe this development underlines the importance of reaching a decision before the visit on Israeli-Saudi Egyptian package and informing all concerned in advance. If Weizman is not going to get a decision during the visit, Israelis should know in advance. If he is, Arabs should know in advance, together with anything we can tell them about decisions on their requests. Ambassador Lewis agrees with these comments.

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